Introduction

Otto Pächt (1902–1988) had a powerful, reverberating impact in the fields of medieval book illumination and fifteenth-century Netherlandish, French, and German painting and sculpture. His catalogues of the illuminated manuscripts at the Bodleian Library and at the Austrian National Library are a virtual grid for the study of medieval book painting. His articles on late medieval nature studies and landscapes, ornamental devices in humanist manuscripts, and the origins of the independent drawing are constantly reread and cited. Pächt’s students speak of a plenitude of observations and hypotheses left unpublished. But Pächt also had a good deal to say about how to do art history. This has become clearer since the publication in 1977 of the series of university lectures on methodology delivered towards the end of his teaching career in Vienna, under the title ‘Methodisches zur kunsthistorischen Praxis.’ The present publication brings that text to an English-speaking public.

It is clearer now that as an art historical intelligence Pächt ranks in importance with Erwin Panofsky (1892–1968) and Ernst Gombrich (born 1909). All three scholars emigrated to English-speaking countries in the 1930s. Panofsky and Gombrich found true intellectual havens in the United States and Britain. They mastered English prose style and indeed brilliantly adapted their very thinking to the new language and the new academic cultures. Pächt, by contrast, chafed among the English and never broke through to a broad readership. Until recently non-German speakers could only perceive the contours of Pächt’s methodological thinking through a narrow window of writings from the English years: a few passages from a review of Panofsky’s Early Netherlandish Painting (1956) and an essay on Alois Riegl (1963), both published in the Burlington Magazine, and through practical samples of his historiographical creativity such as the texts on Jean Fouquet (1940/41), the Master of Mary of Burgundy (1948), and narrative in twelfth-century English book illumination (1962). Pächt’s sparkling university lectures on medieval book painting, early Netherlandish painting, and Rembrandt have over the last several years been edited from the original lecture texts and published in German and in English translation. But the radically original writings of the early 1930s, when Pächt and his colleagues in Vienna were attempting to reinvigorate and extend Riegl’s methodological project, have remained locked in their demanding, intricate original German. This situation is now remedied: the text translated here, based on lectures given in Vienna in 1970/1971, amounts to a clarification of many of these early ideas.

Otto Pächt was born in Vienna and studied art history at the university under Max Dvořák and Julius von Schlosser. He submitted a dissertation on medieval narrative painting in 1925. Around Pächt and his colleague Hans Sedlmayr (1896–1984) crystallized a group of methodologically innovative art historians sometimes called the ‘new’
Vienna School. Pächt and Sedlmayr, impatient with the empiricist fact-gathering that seemed to be dominating academic research, were intensively rereading the works of the formalist art historian Alois Riegl (1858–1905). In 1927 Pächt re-edited Riegl’s Late Roman Art Industry (1901), an extended formal analysis of Roman architecture, sculpture, painting, and decorative arts of the fourth through sixth centuries admired by the likes of Walter Gropius, Walter Benjamin, Georg Lukács, and Mikhail Bakhtin. In 1931 and 1933 Pächt edited the only two numbers of the journal Kunstwissenschaftliche Forschungen, the principal organ of the new group. Here in 1931 Sedlmayr published the theoretical manifesto “Toward a Rigorous Study of Art.” Sedlmayr dismissed attribution, dating, iconography, patronage, the social history of art, and the morphology of style as merely empirical pursuits, a necessary but insufficient first phase of art historical study. The second, interpretative phase would reveal the aesthetic nature of the work, its structure, and ultimately its relationship to the world and to society. The historical studies published in Kunstwissenschaftliche Forschungen, including two essays by Pächt, were meant to exemplify the new methodological programme. The article Pächt wrote for the first number, the most ambitious and difficult of all his writings, reads in the ‘scenic’ altapieces of the fifteenth-century South Tyrolean painter and sculptor Michael Pacher an elaborate, self-reflexive commentary on the late medieval cult image and on sacred history. ‘Design Principles of Fifteenth-Century Northern Painting,’ Pächt’s Habilitationsschrift, published in the second number of Kunstwissenschaftliche Forschungen, shows how early Flemish, Dutch, and French painting were each in different: ways built on a deliberately cultivated tension between the pictorial illusions of real objects and the two-dimensional patterns generated by the projections of those objects onto the picture plane.

The New Vienna School, following Riegl, found entire world-views crystallized in pictorial structure. For example, in the rhomboid surface patterns of the Limburg Brothers or Jean Fouquet, Pächt believed he could read the French taste for ceremony, ritual, judicial assemblies, in general ‘life encompassed by social conventions.’ It is at the level of structure that the work is most securely linked to social reality. The programme is not so different from Panofsky’s iconology, which looks for the ‘intrinsic meaning’ of the work of art, or the ‘symbolical’ values expressed by the work. But by the time Panofsky gets to this level of interpretation he has already completed his formal analysis and instead relies on ‘familiarity with the essential tendencies of the human mind’ and knowledge of the ‘history of cultural symptoms or ‘symbols’ in general’.

In Pächt’s method, by contrast, formal analysis is an open-ended process and continues to generate historical insights at every stage of the inquiry.

In 1933 Pächt was appointed to a teaching position at Heidelberg but was prevented from occupying it by the Nazis. He had to cast about for work and looked to England. After a couple of visits between 1935 and 1937 Pächt emigrated in 1938. By that time he was no longer close with Sedlmayr, who had joined the Nazi party for a year in 1932–1933 and whose subscription with the Anschluss of Austria had burst forth in print in 1938. In 1936 Sedlmayr had succeeded Julius von Schlosser as chair of the art historical institute at Vienna. Sedlmayr was stripped of his post in 1945. But after a few years of disgrace he was appointed to the chair of art history at Munich. Sedlmayr reinvented himself as an ultra-Catholic and unapologetic anti-modernist. Not surprisingly, Pächt and Sedlmayr never patched up their relationship. And yet even in the 1970/1971 lectures Pächt still maintained that Sedlmayr had ‘probably contributed more to the methodology of our subject than anyone else in our time’ (p. 67).
Pächt’s main project in England was the cataloguing of the illuminated manuscripts at the Bodleian Library at Oxford. These volumes, prepared with his pupil Jonathan Alexander, appeared in 1966, 1970 and 1973. But Pächt never held a permanent post in art history. When the offer of the chair of art history at the University of Vienna came in 1963, Pächt discovered that he was eager to lecture before large, responsive audiences in his native language. He made the unusual move of repatriation and from 1965 until his retirement in 1972 Pächt presided together with Otto Demus over the art historical institute at Vienna. In these years he also undertook the cataloguing of the illuminated manuscripts at the Austrian National Library.

Perhaps as a consequence of his repatriation, Pächt was able to pick up the train of his own earlier methodological thought in a way that Panofsky, for instance, never managed to do. And because it was meant to be heard not read, this late text is more accessible than the early articles. In his methodological writings Pächt does not merely keep company with Panofsky and Gombrich: he critiques and corrects them in a way that will resonate in both Britain and the United States, where for more than two decades art historians have been struggling against the intellectual weight of the great émigrés. The leading concept in Pächt is the ‘design principle’ (Gestaltungsprinzip), the hidden logic that governs the structure of a picture or a building. The design principle is not merely visible form but something more fundamental, a system of differential relations that organizes the work: figure-ground relationships, framing devices, tensions between horizontal and vertical elements. For Pächt, the design principle is a more fundamental key to the historical meaning of the work of art than style or iconography, which can vary locally and idiosyncratically. To grasp the design principle is to grasp the basic conceptions of time and space lying behind the work. At his most rigorous, for example in the early book on Austrian panel painting or in ‘Design Principles of Fifteenth-Century Northern Painting,’ Pächt anticipates the analytic moves of a semiotics of art, as outlined for example by his friend and contemporary Meyer Schapiro (1904–1996) in the essay ‘On Some Problems in the Semiotics of Visual Art: Field and Vehicle in Image-Signs’ (1969).

Pächt’s first major set-piece in the present text is a formal analysis of a double-page illumination from the Admont Giant Bible, painted in Salzburg around 1140 (pp. 31–40; colour plate). The vertical images, paired like a diptych, represent Moses receiving the Tables of the Law on Mount Sinai and then handing them down to the people. Pächt methodically knits together a series of simple observations: the green branches of the tree at the lower left overlap and are overlapped by the birds, the bear, and the red fronds; the red, green, and blue blocks of terrain alternate rhythmically; Moses, wearing an ‘interlaced’ green and red garment, slips through the wavy, alternating bands of a cloud; the curved frame of the quadrant in the upper left begins at the left edge by overlapping the blue frame of the miniature but then at the top edge disappears below the frame; the strip of cloud in the left-hand image overlaps that same blue frame but reappears underneath the frame in the right-hand image; in that right-hand image, meanwhile, the blue frame switches places with the thinner gold frame; the gold ground in the right-hand scene, finally, forms a bridge to the gold initial H on the far right, where blue, green, and red are now pushed to the background behind the gold tendrils. Out of this sequence of observations emerges the design principle: the interlacing and alternation of bands of colour. Pächt shows how the Salzburg Moses scenes are less concerned to represent recession into depth than their Byzantine sources and models had been. Instead space is merely

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signalled by the overlappings and interfacing. The forms move in a shallow plane, close to the page, in a kind of rhythmic counterpoint.

Of course everyone knows that it is useless to compare medieval pictures to modern naturalistic images, and that instead they have to be understood on their own terms. The idea of the historicity and relativity of representational systems, grounded in the neo-Kantianism of late nineteenth-century aestheticians like Konrad Fiedler and the non-normative formalism of art historians like Riegl, was common coin already by the 1920s. In that decade, in a series of rigorous and philosophically informed articles, the young Panofsky theorized the historicity of pictorial structure. In ‘Perspective as Symbolic Form’ (1924) Panofsky showed how classical antiquity, the middle ages, and the Renaissance each developed their own internally coherent system for representing space on plane surfaces. Much later, in Art and Illusion (1960), Gombrich would argue that the history of art was driven by a process of successive adoptions and abandonments of self-sufficient representational schemas. Yet in crucial ways both Panofsky and Gombrich backed off from the full implications of their own insights into the relativity and incommensurability of representational systems, whereas Pächt never did. For Panofsky, the perspective system devised by Brunelleschi in the early fifteenth century, the so-called costruzione legittima, succeeded in balancing the conflicting claims of perceiving subject and perceived object; Renaissance perspective ‘objectified the subjective’ in a way that would later be formalized, definitively, by Kant’s model of the categories of understanding. Renaissance art takes on outsized proportions in Panofsky’s version of things. In Gombrich, meanwhile, one has the sense at times that the history of painting is rolling inexorably toward Constable and naturalism. Both scholars built normative models of the history of art that left little conceptual space for twentieth-century art except as a reckless rebellion. And in both models medieval art ended up figuring mostly negatively. In Panofsky’s seminal essay ‘Iconography and Iconology’ (1939), for example, a tenth-century miniature with a city that seems to ‘float’ in the sky illustrates the principle that even the strangest-looking medieval representations can be ‘corrected’ by historical knowledge. The city ceases to float once we realize that the background should not be read as empty space, as it would be in a Renaissance image. But Panofsky does not explain what purposes the tenth-century representational system might have served, or what meanings it might generate that are quite unavailable to the Renaissance image. Gombrich in Art and Illusion, meanwhile, treats medieval drawings from life as failures and discusses them under the rubric of ‘the pathology of representation.’

Riegl had made his original point about the relativity of styles by playing off late antique and early medieval art against the overwhelming prestige of classical art. Medieval art, heedless of both nature and the classical ideal, came to serve the same heuristic function for the generation of Panofsky, Pächt, Schapiro, and Gombrich. Pächt points out in The Practice of Art History that because ‘the subject matter of Christian art consists entirely of miracles,’ medieval art had to ‘create a pictorial world of its own, with a visual logic independent of what we call the laws of Nature’ (p. 45). Pächt, like Riegl, was ready to extend the idea of an independent visual logic to the rest of the history of art, beyond the middle ages. This is just what Panofsky and Gombrich did not do. In their histories the Renaissance is the moment that the logic of art loses its independence. One of the corollaries of Pächt’s conviction of the inescapability of pictorial schemata is that he was able to grasp the true strangeness of late medieval painterly naturalism. Pächt, like Meyer Schapiro, saw the cultivation of
illusionistic devices in fifteenth-century northern painting not as the natural and inevitable collapse of a decaying representational ancien régime but as a dynamic stylistic revolution, without precedent but also in some ways without a true legacy.

But even the claim that Pächt was a more consistent relativist than Panofsky or Gombrich fails to encompass his originality. What really distinguished Pächt – and what is hardest to define without sliding into mystification or anecdote – was the ingenuity and creativity of his eye. One has the sense when Pächt breaks down a work like the Admont Bible miniature into its structural building blocks, resisting the impulses to merely admire form or couple it to textual meaning, generating through formal analysis as it were an entirely new and unexpected work, that this is an art historian who is seeing like an artist. Pächt’s writing suggests that this kind of looking is the indispensable core of art historical research, and that without it art history is reduced to a minor branch of general history. This was the ‘practice’ that ‘method’ would be built around. It is clear that Pächt did not at all find it easy to represent his own creative looking within the conventions of scholarly writing. He deplored poeticizing, belittling attempts to transpose intuitive, subjective responses to works of art into language. Such attempts were futile and misleading since the whole point of making pictures was to generate meanings and responses beyond the frontiers of language. And yet Pächt was unwilling to conceal the real sensation of visual discovery, the epiphanic moment that punctuates cognitive labour. Pächt flags these moments in his own text, as if he were recapitulating his own experience with the objects and hoping to catalyze his readers’ experiences, with phrases like ‘the scales fall from the eyes’ (p. 22), ‘the penny drops’ (p. 58), ‘a light went on’ (p. 59), commonplacesthat cannot quite be dismissed as clichés. Pächt’s sometimes laboured prose registers the struggle to convert his experience of close looking into usable scholarly currency. Panofsky and Gombrich, by contrast, seem to take a positive, athletic delight in expository writing. In their texts dialectic tends to resolve itself in the drive to clarity; the encounter with the work of art leaves no residue of surprise. At times they even give the impression of steering clear of difficulty, and increasingly so as they settled more comfortably into the discipline of English prose style.

All Pächt’s work respects a pair of negative principles: impatience with discursive models of pictorial meaning, in short, iconography; and mistrust of Romantic or idealist notions about genius or beauty. Pächt’s animus against iconography comes out more fully in the present text than anywhere else in his writings. He was responding in these lectures to two decades of the almost unchallenged institutional success of iconographic studies, embodied by Gombrich and Wind in England and in America by Panofsky, who promoted iconography, or the study of pictorial symbols, into ‘iconology,’ a general exegesis of culture. In the 1950s and 60s iconology generated an endlessly ramifying research programme and flourished virtually without resistance. Because it sends students off to the library instead of asking them to handle works of art all day, iconographic studies had a natural institutional advantage in universities. Pächt is rough on iconology and dismisses it as a ‘refuge,’ an easier option than the adjustment of one’s basic ways of seeing (p. 98). Ultimately Pächt was not a systematic thinker and for more theoretically strenuous critiques of the discursive bias in art history one needs to turn to Lorenz Dittmann, Oskar Bätschmann, or Georges Didi-Hubermann. But for a long time there was no purchase at all against iconography within Anglo-American academic art history and the few critical remarks levelled by Pächt against Panofsky’s theory of ‘disguised symbolism’ in his 1956 review
of Early Netherlandish Painting came to serve as kind of rallying point for anti-iconographers. One may also recall that Svetlana Alpers mentioned both Riegl and Pächt in the introduction to The Art of Describing (1983), her ingenious counterthrust against the favouritism for narrative and expository painting imbedded within the historiography of Western art since Vasari.10

One of Pächt’s profoundest insights was that iconology and other text-based art historical approaches inevitably come to rely on the myth of the innocent eye. When art historians focus on iconographical programming – the complex circuitboard where pictorial types are affixed to textual points – they tend to underrate the ways meaning is already imbedded in the pictorial types. The pictorial types are in effect taken as good-faith representations of things in nature, carried out according to more or less successful pictorial conventions. We have already seen that if the conventions happen to be less successful, they can easily be ‘corrected’ by an historically informed observer. Once the conventions are corrected, it will supposedly be obvious what the representations represent. The only task left to the art historian, learned in mythography, theology, or intellectual history, is to decipher the iconographical programme that the representations are imbedded in. Images, in other words, are reduced to mere pictographs.

In rebuttal to all this Pächt pointed out, and few today would disagree with him, that perception itself is already interpretative, that ‘seeing and thinking are indivisible’ (p. 70). The most apparently natural representations, built on apparently naive perceptions of the real world, are already meaningfully shaped. For the art historian it is not a matter of correcting the representational conventions but of explaining them historically. In fact there is a great deal of explaining to do long before any images can be matched to textual programmes. But pre-iconographic meaning is less susceptible to ‘research,’ and insights into this kind of meaning are less verifiable. Because they underrate the complexity of form, iconographers believe implicitly in the substitutability of form, whether by other forms or by linguistic statements. Pächt by contrast insists on the non-substitutability of art: art ‘is a statement in its own terms, sui generis, concerning the universe, existence, everyday life, and the Last Things’ (p. 83). Iconophobic theologians mistrust the senses because they are too powerful; iconographers by contrast underrate the cognitive activism of perception. Yet the consequences for art in both cases are the same. One can see the difficulty Pächt took on when he tried to write between these two powerful intellectual traditions.

The corollary to Pächt’s anti-textualism was anti-contextualism. Pächt considered the social-historical approach to art reductionist and did not even bother to argue against it very energetically. There was no way he could anticipate the conceptual reinvigoration and institutional success of the social history of art in the 1970s and 1980s. On the other hand Pächt seems to have failed to recognize the creativity and importance of the researches of the Hamburg scholar Aby Warburg (1866–1929) into the sociological matrix of Renaissance art.

The other negative principle behind Pächt’s work was the mistrust of idealizing abstractions such as genius and beauty. Pächt considered himself a scientific historian. Like Sedlmayr and others of his generation, he was trying to purge the academic discipline of art history of shoddy thinking and facile recourse to attractive, sentimental myths about art-making. He dismissed the aesthetician Fiedler’s dictum that ‘genius can have no forerunners’ as ‘entirely baseless,’ as ‘wishful thinking rooted in the mythology of Romanticism’ (p. 118). He was equally hard on his teacher Schlosser
who, following the teachings of his friend Benedetto Croce, strayed from the Vienna School orthodoxy established by Riegl and Dvořák and asserted the absolute non-derivability of artistic genius (pp. 61–62). Pächt saw this as the dereliction of the art historian’s duty at the crucial moment. Why should the art historian be content to study the routine transmission of conventional types and topoi, he wondered, while leaving the explanation of the most original and powerful works of art to the supposedly better-equipped philosophers, theologians, psychologists, and ‘even’ sociologists? Gombrich, too, with his model of normal art-production punctuated by the unpredictable interventions of strong, revolutionary artists, appeared to Pächt to have turned his back on Riegl in favour of Croce’s and Schlosster’s cult of genius (p. 121).

Pächt may not have been treating Fiedler and Schlosster entirely fairly in his polemic against the biographical and heroic mode of art historical writing. Arguments have different functions at different moments. In 1870 or even 1900, an assertion of the inexplicability of artistic creation was a defense against historicist and materialist models of art-making and art historical progress. Fiedler and Schlosster had a strong sense of what they did not want art to be. ‘Genius’ for them was in part shorthand for the idea that art-making proceeded according to its own internal logic and could not be reduced to technology or applied theology. ‘Genius’ was a confusing anthropomorphization not unlike Riegl’s Kunstwollen, which was likewise designed to rescue art from positivist scholarship. Fiedler in fact helped launch a formalist and aestheticist backlash to nineteenth-century historicism and positivism that ended up embracing Riegl, Schlosster, Panofsky, Sedlmayr, and Pächt alike. Pächt must have noticed that Schlosster, for all his admiration for the irreducible artist, actually avoided writing about individual artists and celebrated works of art more assiduously than Pächt himself or even Riegl ever did.

In trying to untangle free will and determinism, Pächt as always fell back on Riegl. The lesson he drew from Late Roman Art Industry (1901) and especially The Dutch Group Portrait (1902) was that no individual artist or work escapes the grid of history. History sets artistic problems; the artists who devise successful solutions to those problems are singled out by conventional terms like ‘genius.’ But the singularity of these artists and these solutions is only a function of their location in history. It is history that makes originality possible. Such paradoxes derive from the German philosophical hermeneutic tradition that broke into historical scholarship through the writings of Wilhelm Dilthey and became a major theme in the Geisteswissenschaften in this century. Pächt was no philosopher, though, and his account of the dialectic between freedom and destiny is somewhat confused. In the 1930s, in a long review in Art Bulletin of the second volume of Kunstwissenschaftliche Forschungen and in private correspondence, Meyer Schapiro bluntly objected to his friend Pächt’s illiberal reliance on national ‘constants’ to classify and explain styles.15 Pächt defended himself in the lectures of 1970–1971, but not entirely convincingly (pp. 135–136).

Pächt’s worries about the problem of aesthetic value are today perhaps more pertinent. He quickly dismisses ‘the notion of an absolute norm of beauty’ as a myth (p. 130). But he fears that when normative aesthetics is rejected it will be replaced by a ‘relative’ aesthetics which turns out to be simply historicism and not an aesthetics at all. In other words, he sees art history collapsing into a homogeneous, value-free catalogue of artifacts, all equally useful as documents. Pächt calls this the ‘Achilles heel’ of Riegl’s system (p. 129). Pächt then tries to rescue value by introducing the more
manageable issue of technical accomplishment. Sheer technical success is in itself, needless to say, no measure of artistic value. The ability to reproduce complex optical impressions of space, colour, or texture on a plane surface has a different historical meaning, and will be valued differently by historically informed beholders, depending on when and where that ability is exercised. Pächt points out that although any 'competent graduate of a modern (or, today, not quite so modern) life class' can now draw the human body better than Masaccio could, no one will call this art student a better artist than Masaccio (p. 130). Masaccio's superiority is a function of his place in history; only history – the Kunstwollen – converts ability into art. But this argument evades the problem of why some works exert power over beholders well outside their initial, historical arena, even on beholders who know nothing of that original arena. Aesthetic value is reduced to being a mere product of the historical point of view; whereas one might well have thought of it as potentially interfering with historical inquiry.

Admittedly aesthetic value is a troublesome quantity because it involves pleasure. To make conceptual space for it within a theory of art history would entail some philosophical engagement with the capacity of form, whether ideal or abject, balanced or unbalanced, harmonious or dissonant, to give pleasure. This would introduce an unhistorical and subjective moment that makes the Geisteswissenschaftler uneasy, and rightly so. Sedlmayr had actually broached the issue and said that art history needed to acquire a 'value dimension.' Pächt cites him but as we have seen he backs off from the challenge. Earlier in these lectures he had gone so far as to quote, approvingly, Riegl's reported remark that 'the best art historian would be the one with no taste at all' (p. 29). Pächt was perhaps too eager to dissociate himself from idealistic nonsense about the ineffability or inscrutability of art. He dismissed the subjective moment by caricaturing it as the 'intuitive,' by associating it with the obviously problematic practice of connoisseurship, and by placing the discipline of art history before the false choice between connoisseurship and scientific scholarship (p. 96). He got entangled in the argument about the historicity of artistic quality and almost forgot that neither technical competence nor epistemological exemplarity is a necessary or a sufficient condition of art. Yet it was Pächt himself who so often demonstrated that artistic achievement had nothing to do with the various representational, discursive, or cognitive ambitions of an image.

'Work of art' was a key concept for Pächt. But he managed to avoid defining it clearly. He used the term as if somehow it did not itself depend on a notion of aesthetic value; as if there were a way of distinguishing works of art from other kinds of artifacts without recourse to some theory of subjectively grounded and partly ahistorical value. Pächt's understanding of aesthetic experience has to be inferred from his historical method, which as we have seen had mostly to do with acquiring 'unfamiliar habits of looking' (p. 86). In practice this interpretative looking can be a highly disruptive exercise. Pächt as we have seen arrives at the structure or 'design principle' of the work by looking through subject matter and style; by seeing the work as a system of figure-ground oppositions, framing devices, planar patterns; by tracing the work back to a 'formal opportunity' or brief, a moment of origin hedged by considerations of format and reception. This perceptual reconditioning leads to strange-looking results. The 'structural' reading confounds the sensible, well-intentioned, anthropomorphic reading. In the analysis of the double-page spread from the Admont Giant Bible, Pächt rewrites the story of Moses and the Tables of the Law into a formal narrative. He flattens the representation into a pulsating, mesmerizing pattern of
interlacing bands of colour. By the end he has in effect created a new work that looks more like one of Kandinsky’s *Compositions* from the early 1910s. He then focuses on the temporal anomalies in the fourteenth-century Holy Sepulchre sculptural group at Freiburg and Donatello’s *Judith and Holofernes* (pp. 41 ff.). In both cases narrative unity and plausibility are contradicted by the demands of symbolic display. The recumbent figure of Christ is surrounded by the Three Maries, even though the scriptural account has the women arriving on Easter Sunday to find the tomb empty. Judith in Donatello’s famous group holds her sword aloft in an awkward gesture that is part interrupted action, part timeless ceremony. Pächt converts the works into a pair of new *Laocoon* that will exemplify a new relationship of sculpture to time. In both readings he introduces historical factors – on the one hand the ritual context of the Passion liturgy, and on the other the original placement of the Judith that led Donatello to think differently about each separate point of view – not so much to resolve the temporal anomalies, but to preserve them. The new readings compel the beholder, in each case, to hold in the mind two irreconcilable conceptions of time. In fact nothing could be easier for the eye schooled in early twentieth-century painting and sculpture.

An important passage in the text is the analysis of Brunelleschi’s Pazzi Chapel (pp. 53-59, figs. 26-30). Pächt points out that one can choose to see the chapel either as a domed, square space with three subordinate spaces (the domed chancel in front and the two tunnel-vaulted transepts at the sides) or as an oblong space (central square and transepts) joined to a single subordinate space (chancel). Either way, the walls will look incomplete. There are too few pilasters. Either the corner pilasters belong to the oblong face walls, in which case the side walls are deprived of any flanking or framing elements; or the corner pilasters belong to the vaulted transept spaces, in which case the central triads of the oblong face walls lose their frames. Pächt argues that the key is to see the building not as an additive structure, as an accumulation of separate components, but as a dynamic system of interlocking spaces and solids. He derives the analysis of the building from a real-time experience of the space, just as the reading of the Judith was built on the multiple points of view; the work, one might say, is more than the sum of the art historian’s photographs. Pächt explicitly says that his new Pazzi Chapel has an integrity and harmony that it lacked in the conventional art historical readings. But this is misleading. Here one needs to read Pächt against himself. It is not the Pazzi Chapel that has discovered coherence, for if anything the building in Pächt’s account feels more like a Baroque church and threatens to fly apart. Indeed by explicitly linking his analysis of the Pazzi Chapel to Sedlmayr’s well-known re-reading of the plan of Borromini’s San Carlo, Pächt at the same time implied a hidden historical continuity between the two buildings. The harmony that Pächt speaks of is really only the internal harmony of his own critical narrative about the chapel: first there is confusion, then comes the creative insight into the structure of the space that ignites the reading and propels it toward a surprising conclusion.

The formal analyses of two famous works from the Florentine Quattrocento in *The Practice of Art History* are unexpected in light of Pächt’s main interests. Perhaps he included them in order to stress that the text was fundamentally a polemic against the nineteenth-century cult of the Quattrocento and the lingering humanistic bias in twentieth-century scholarship. The analysis of the pages from the Admont Giant Bible is a more characteristic sample of Pächt’s mode of operation, namely the extraction of formal dramas out of non-classical, indeed in some cases quite unpre-
possessing or even ugly pictures. This forcing open of the field of the aesthetic to the rebarbative, the indecorous, the irrational, and incidental was one of the main themes of Vienna School art history and of Sedlmayr and Pächt’s Strukturanalyse in particular. The Vienna School was drawn to very early and very late medieval art, to Mannerism and the Baroque, and to the provincial. Moreover, from our perspective at the end of the century, Pächt’s inquiries into the ‘shapedness’ of vision, the opacity of the picture plane, the reversal of centre and margin, and the abandonment of optical mimesis as a primary artistic goal fall into place within the larger field of modernism. The same can be said of Meyer Schapiro’s interests in the grotesque, the unconscious, and the socially subversive. Both scholars’ work emerged out of newly dispassionate, disillusioned attitudes toward the authority of classicism, the bourgeois reverence for the Italian Renaissance, and the humanist tradition of scholarship. The image they were looking for was at once very far away, the product of a remote and frankly alien Christian culture, and very near at hand, in the art of their own time.

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Notes


3 The term was actually used by Panofsky already in Die deutsche Plastik des 11. bis 13. Jahrhunderts (Munich 1924), 4, 10, and perhaps earlier by others.


5 Panofsky, Perspective as Symbolic Form (New York 1991).


7 Panofsky, ‘Iconography and Iconology’ 34–35.

8 Gombrich, Art and Illusion, 77.


13 Cited here on p. 129.