

ON THE CONSTRUCTION AND SOURCES OF ERWIN PANOFSKY'S ICONOLOGY

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ABSTRACT

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The article deals with the impact of Karl Borinski and Karl Mannheim on Erwin Panofsky's iconological method of interpretation of works of visual arts as presented in his 1939 *Studies in Iconology*. In a slightly different form it was firstly published in *The Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* XXXVII, 1974, 368–373.

Keywords: Art history – tradition – iconology – Erwin Panofsky – Karl Borinski – Karl Mannheim

The late Erwin Panofsky (1892–1968), one of the most widely read and most influential art historians of his/our time, wrote in a letter to Herbert von Einem written in April 1962 the following about himself:

*“Was ich mir vornahm, war nicht sowohl etwas ‘Originelles’ zu leisten, als vielmehr unter Vermeidung der Einseitigkeit so viel von der grossen Tradition des 19. Jahrhunderts (Vöge, Riegl, Goldschmidt, Warburg, sogar ein bißchen Wölfflin und Friedländer) in das 20. Jahrhundert herüberzuretten, als es in meinen Kräfte stand. Aber es muss auch Eklektiker geben in der Wissenschaft wie in der Kunst.”*¹

Almost identical “topos of modesty” was repeated by Panofsky in a letter of May 1965 addressed to Otto von Simson:

*“Ich bin nicht besonders bescheiden; aber ich weiss, dass ich nur ein Eklektikus bin, der versucht hat, was im 19. Jahrhundert gegründet wurde, ins 20. herüberzuretten: Goldschmidt, Warburg, Vöge, Riegl – auch Wölfflin. Ich habe eigentlich nie etwas ‘entdeckt’ und kaum je einen neuen ‘Gedanken’ in die Debatte geworfen...; mit dem, was die Vöge–Goldschmidt–M. J. Friedländer–Wölfflin–Generation geleistet hat, kann man wirklich nicht vergleichen.”*²

This debt to the *patres* of the modern history of art Panofsky did much to wipe out with heart-felt obituaries (Aby Warburg and Heinrich Wölfflin), sweet-sad memoirs (Adolf Goldschmidt and Wilhelm Vöge), keenly written controversies (Alois Riegl and, once again, Wölfflin), and of course, the large body of his art-historical books and artic-

¹ Herbert von Einem, Erwin Panofsky zum Gedächtnis, *Wallraf-Richartz-Jahrbuch* XXX, 1968, p. 7; Dieter Wuttke, *Erwin Panofsky Korrespondenz 1910 bis 1968*, Wiesbaden 2001–2014, pp. 192–193, no. 2842.

² Otto von Simson, Nachruf auf Erwin Panofsky, *Sitzungsberichte der Kunstgeschichtlichen Gesellschaft zu Berlin* XVI, 1967–1968, p. 13; Wuttke (note 1), pp. 652–653; no. 3152.

les. However, this note has not been written to outline the impact of great art-historical conceptions, developed in the time of Panofsky's youth on the shaping of his theory of art. We are rather interested in tracing the genesis of both the form and content of an idea which may be and often really is considered a genuine sample of Panofsky's manner of writing about art. The two passages quoted above are, nevertheless, the convincing indication of the power exercised by tradition over Panofsky's mind; and furthermore, they demonstrate the idiosyncrasies of his mental habits.

The point in question is this. At the very beginning of his methodological manifesto, "Introductory" to *Studies in Iconology* of 1939, Panofsky sought to define the distinction between subject matter or meaning of a work of art, on the one hand, and its form on the other. To make his case clear he constantly resorts to analyzing so ordinary and everyday human action as a meeting with an acquaintance on the street naturally must be. For the sake of greater precision we shall quote Panofsky's famous sentences at length:

"When an acquaintance greets me on the street by removing his hat, what I see from a formal point of view is nothing but the change of certain details within a configuration forming part of the general pattern of colour, lines and volumes which constitutes my world of vision. When I identify [...] this configuration as an object (gentleman), and the change of detail as an event (hat-removing), I have already overstepped the limits of purely formal perception and entered a first sphere of subject matter or meaning [= the factual meaning] [...]."

Now the objects and events thus identified will naturally produce a certain reaction within myself. From the way my acquaintance performs his action I may be able to sense whether he is in good or bad humour, and whether his feelings towards me are indifferent, friendly or hostile [= the expressional meaning] [...] the factual and expressional meaning may be classified together: they constitute the class of primary or natural meanings.

However, my realization that the lifting of the hat stands for a greeting belongs in an altogether different realm of interpretation. This form of salute is peculiar to the western world and is a residue of medieval chivalry: armed men used to remove their helmets to make clear their peaceful intentions and their confidence in the peaceful intentions of others [...]. Therefore, when I interpret the removal of a hat as a polite greeting, I recognize in it a meaning which may be called secondary or conventional; [...]

And finally: besides constituting a natural event in space and time, besides naturally indicating moods or feelings, besides conveying a conventional greeting, the action of my acquaintance can reveal to an experienced observer all that goes to make up his 'personality'. The meaning thus discovered may be called the intrinsic meaning or content."³

By transferring the results of the foregoing analysis from everyday human action to a work of art, Panofsky distinguishes in its subject matter or meaning the same three strata: (i) *primary or natural subject matter*, subdivided into *factual* and *expressional*; (ii) *secondary or conventional subject matter*; (iii) *intrinsic meaning or content*.⁴

This informal and highly individual way of reasoning which recurs as the leitmotiv in Panofsky's basic methodological study is not, however, without precedent in previous historical writing. We find an argument along almost identical lines in the once famous

³ Erwin Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology: Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance*, New York 1939, pp. 26–28.

⁴ *Ibidem*, pp. 115 f.

book of the German historian of literature Karl Borinski (1861–1922), *Die Rätsel Michelangelos: Michelangelo und Dante*, published in 1908. In Chapter 4 of Part II of the book, *Mystische Bewegungslehre des Platonismus*, where there are many interesting words about *die durchgehende Neigung des Künstlers [scil. Michelangelos] seinen Figuren eine eigentümliche Wendung durch Drehung des Körpers zuzuteilen*. Borinski states there what follows:

“*Ich für mein Teil habe diese spez. plastische ‘Verdrehtheit’, namentlich in ihrem Endstadium als stereotype Barockmanier, niemals ohne den Eindruck eines ursprünglich symbolischen Zeremonielles ansehen können. Es wäre nicht das einzige Mal in der Geistesgeschichte, dass sich eine geistig leer erscheinende konventionelle Form auf einen vergessenen Bedeutungsgrund zurückführen liesse. Wer deutet beim Hutabnehmen jetzt noch an den Waffenbrauch, der den ‘Helm’ bei freundlichen Zusammentreffen abzulegen zwang?*”⁵

We believe that the mere juxtaposition of the two quotations reveals the very place where Panofsky quarried the foundation stone for the reasoning of his methodological exposé.⁶ A further inquiry into the art-theoretical writings of the first thirty years of our century will provide us with a clue to Panofsky’s *modus operandi* with Borinski’s hat-removing simile.

The first version of the study which now serves as the introduction to *Studies* had been delivered by Panofsky on 20 May 1931 as a lecture before the Kieler Ortsgruppe der Kantgesellschaft.⁷ In the lecture, too, Panofsky arrived at the distinction of the three strata in the meaning of a work of art; this time he called them *Phenomensinn (zu teilen in Sach- und Ausdruckssinn)*, *Bedeutungssinn*, *Dokumentsinn (Wesensinn)*. In the lecture, too, Panofsky used the already known simile of hat-removing when he sought to distinguish between the second stratum (“*die Schicht des Bedeutungssinns*”) and “*jene letzte und höchste Region [...], die wir mit einem Ausdruck Karl Mannheims als die Region des ‘Dokumentsinns’ oder auch als die Region des Wesenssinns bezeichnen können*:

Wenn uns ein Mensch auf der Strasse grüsst, so ist der Bedeutungssinn dieser Handlung (deren Sachsinn sich als ein Abnehmen des Hutes verbunden mit lachelnder Kopfeigung beschreiben lässt, und deren Ausdruckssinn zwischen Freundlichkeit, Devotion, Gleichgültigkeit und Ironie in mannigfacher Weise variieren kann) ganz ohne Zweifel eine Höflichkeitsbezeugung. Aber darüber hinaus werden wir aus ihr den Eindruck einer ganz bestimmten Wesensart erhalten können.”⁸

Panofsky’s own reference to the article “*Beiträge zur Theorie der Weltanschauungs-Interpretation*”, written in the early 1920’s by the German social philosopher Karl Mannheim (1893–1947), is of the utmost importance in this connection, not only because Mannheim’s “*drei Arten von Sinns*” — objective, expressional, and documentary — were the *fons et origo* for both the conception and the terminology of Panofsky’s three strata in

⁵ Karl Borinski, *Die Rätsel Michelangelos: Michelangelo und Dante*, Munich 1908, p. 177.

⁶ Panofsky’s familiarity with Borinski’s book is proved beyond any doubt. See, among others, his review article *Die Michelangelo-Literatur seit 1914*, *Wiener Jahrbuch für Kunstgeschichte*, N. F. I, 1921–1922, pp. 1–63, esp. 60 ff.; idem, *Idea: Ein Beitrag zur Begriffsgeschichte der alteren Kunsttheorie*, Leipzig–Berlin 1924, p. 92, nos. 119 and 120 (where the very chapter on *The Platonic Doctrine of Mystical Motion* is quoted); also idem, *Studies in Iconology* (no. 3), passim.

⁷ Erwin Panofsky, *Zum Problem der Beschreibung und Inhaltsdeutung von Werken der bildenden Kunst*, *Logos XXI*, 1932, pp. 103–119.

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 115 f.

the meaning of a work of art, but also because of the very type of reasoning Mannheim employed: he, too, proceeds with all the three strata per *analogiam* to the everyday human action, this time to giving alms to a beggar. The point of departure is determined by the following sentence: “*Ich gehe mit einem Freunde auf der Strasse, ein Bettler steht an der Ecke, er gibt ihm ein Almosen.*”⁹

Thus we firmly believe that the history of art, like any other human activity expressing itself by means of words, is of the topoi-coining and topoi-using nature. The application to such an activity of human mind of the methods close to comparative literature seems to us, therefore, to be fully justifiable by its bringing out the positive contribution for a better understanding of both the vocabulary and structure of art-historical writings.

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⁹ *Wiener Jahrbuch für Kunstgeschichte*, N.F. I, 1921–1922), pp. 236–274, esp. 245 f. and 261 f. Mannheim’s article has been quoted by Panofsky in his study *Über das Verhältnis der Kunstgeschichte zur Kunsttheorie: Ein Beitrag zu der Erörterung über die Möglichkeit kunstwissenschaftlicher Grundbegriffe*, *Zeitschrift für Ästhetik und allgemeine Kunstwissenschaft XVIII*, 1925, pp. 129–161, esp. 155, note 2. For a little afterthought see Raymund Klibansky – Erwin Panofsky – Fritz Saxl, *Saturn and Melancholy: Studies in the Natural Philosophy, Religion, and Art*, London 1964, p. 345, n. 208. For more on Panofsky and Mannheim, see Ján Bakoš, *Model umenia v ikonológii*, *Ars IV*, 1970, pp. 149 f.; Joan Hartt, Erwin Panofsky and Karl Mannheim: A Dialogue on Interpretation, *Critical Inquiry*, 1992–1993, pp. 534–566.