

«We stand before the first things made on the Rhine. They will be the last, if we do not grasp them now.»¹ With those apocalyptic words, Hermann Schnitzler ended the brief introduction to the catalogue of the exhibition of Romanesque art he curated in Cologne in 1947. *Romanische Kunst* [hereafter RK] was one of several medieval exhibitions held in that almost totally destroyed city immediately after World War II, but it is unusual because Schnitzler, surrounded by destruction both external and internal, found a safe haven in the portable works of Romanesque art he displayed, works that had been sheltered during the War. The status of the objects in RK as rare and fortunate survivals was vividly apparent because they were on view in the same city in which their contemporaries, Cologne's famous crown of Romanesque churches, stood in various states of destruction. Surrounded by such destruction, survivals can become highly auratized, their significance overdetermined. Both of those tendencies characterize Schnitzler's exhibition. This paper presents RK, which has never been studied before, and tries to explain what made Schnitzler, in the ruins of Cologne, able to claim that seeing his exhibition would cause a viewer, «perhaps for the first time in years, again to feel what it means to be secure».² In doing that, it illuminates a prime example of the «narrows of transmission» to which this issue of *kritische berichte* is devoted.

RK opened on 6 September 1947 in Cologne's Alte Universität. Little is known of the planning for the exhibition. Schnitzler, the curator of Cologne's Schnütgen Museum, was assisted by a working committee of Leopold Reidemeister, the head of the city's museums; Willy Weyres, the *Dombaumeister*; Joseph Hostler, a priest at the cathedral and the head of Cologne's diocesan museum; and the art historian and gallerist Hans Melchers. This roster makes clear that RK was a Cologne-centered operation, but unlike *Meisterwerke aus Kölner Museen* and *Kölner Glasmalerei vom 13. Jahrhundert bis zur Gegenwart*, two exhibitions of primarily medieval art held in the city the previous year, RK did not display objects only from Cologne's collections. As a result, it far surpassed these earlier exhibitions in size and conceptual ambition. RK was still a relatively small show, but it was full of major works. These included such Cologne pieces as the ivory Heribert comb, the Gero Cross, the doors of St. Maria in Kapitol, and the shrines of Heribert and Anno, but also loans from further afield: the Essen Golden Madonna; all four of the Ottonian-era crosses from the Essen treasury; parts of the Barbarossa chandelier from Aachen; and the Werden bronze crucifix. The 135 objects were listed in a slim catalogue comprising 29 pages of text and 18 black-and-white illustrations (Fig. 1).

Evidence about the appearance of RK is extremely scarce. No photographs of the exhibition are known. According to one review, the galleries were simple and light.³ The still ruinous state of Cologne meant that the show had something of the provision-

al about it. The tomb of Plectrudis from St. Maria in Kapitol was not available for the opening because it was still being freed from the bombed-out ruins (it was added to the exhibition later), while that church's famous doors were displayed horizontally rather than upright. This was the result of curatorial necessity – the doors were too tall to fit in the display space standing up – but reviewers enthusiastically greeted this «welcome makeshift solution» as a curatorial innovation that allowed viewers for the first time really to appreciate the carvings.⁴

RK was remarkable for the treasures it assembled, the conditions under which it exhibited them, and also for the way it interpreted the objects on display. The last is due to its curator, who was a complex and far-ranging intellectual. Schnitzler (1905-1976) was a student of Adolph Goldschmidt and Paul Clemen, under whom he wrote a dissertation on Rhenish reliquary shrines. Soon after receiving his doctorate, Schnitzler went to America as Wilhelm Koehler's assistant at Harvard, but, in a reversal of the usual path for German art historians in the 1930s, by the middle of that decade he chose to return to Germany, where he soon began work as a curator at the Schnütgen Museum.⁵ Schnitzler's return is certainly a sign of his patriotism, if not of an enthusiasm for the Nazi regime. Schnitzler was a Nazi, but his thought (and its manifestation in RK) cannot simply be classified by that term.⁶

Although trained as a medievalist, Schnitzler was deeply interested in the art of the classical modern and was an important representative of an intellectual trend in the immediate postwar period to associate medieval and modern art. In 1947, the same year he curated RK, Schnitzler gave a lecture on Picasso to the Donnerstag-Gesellschaft, a group around the noble Salm-Reifferscheidt family. The title of that lecture, *Picasso in uns selbst* (*Picasso in ourselves*), referred explicitly to the cultural critic of Max Picard's recently published book *Hitler in uns selbst*, which viewed Hitler as the result of an existential crisis in modern man.⁷ Similar worries infused Schnitzler's presentation of Romanesque art; this makes his brief introductory essay to RK a remarkable document.

Schnitzler began that text by placing his exhibition into the context of similar shows, drawing a comparison between RK and the last major display of medieval art in Cologne, the massive 1925 exhibition intended to mark the alleged millennium of the Rhineland's political alignment with Germany.⁸ Despite the vast differences in scale, Schnitzler saw similarities between the two, writing that RK had, for the first time since 1925, brought together the most important works of Romanesque art from Cologne and the lower Rhine. But Schnitzler, perhaps manifesting the modernist's belief in the necessity of innovation, was not content simply to liken RK to its predecessor. He wrote that, unlike the millennium exhibition, his



Cover of *Romanische Kunst* (Cologne, 1947).

show excluded objects that were of merely historical interest or only aesthetically pleasing. This assertion is vague and may not be fair to the organizers of the 1925 show, but Schnitzler claimed that his exclusions, together with his show's installation in a non-museum space, governed the way the works in *RK* were arranged and presented. He wrote that his exhibition had «to forgo any firmly outlined organization», but insisted that his curatorial denials and refusals were intentional.⁹ They were «not only the result of material lack; we did them consciously so that the individual work of art should appear free of all the external ties by which it is usually firmly bound.»¹⁰

This refusal of a dominant organizing principle and the insistence that the objects in *RK* were liberated from external bonds distinguished Schnitzler's show not only from the 1925 Cologne exhibition, but, likely more significantly, also from a much more recent predecessor: the Nazi cultural-historical exhibition *Deutsche Größe*, which had been on view in nearby Brussels and Strasbourg just five years earlier. That display, in keeping with Nazi historical ideas, had given great weight to the Middle Ages and their perceived close relationship to the Nazi present. *Deutsche Größe* had an exceptionally strong and emphatic organization, one that was manifested in its display techniques, in which the architecture of each chronologically-ordered gallery mimicked a building from the era it exhibited.¹¹ Schnitzler's emphasis on *RK*'s lack of organization and elimination of 'external ties' were thus attempts, typical of the era, to bracket out this Nazi-era predecessor.

Schnitzler's claim that *RK* was unique led him to make some extraordinary assertions. When he contrasted his display of the large Romanesque reliquary shrines with their presentation in the 1925 Cologne exhibition, he wrote: «Then, a historical fact, the thousand-year long bond between the Rhineland and the *Reich*, was meant to be ceremoniously demonstrated. Today, these works want to demonstrate nothing except their existence [*Dasein*]. They stand there as pure objects, with only themselves to depend on; that is how they confront us.»¹² Here, Schnitzler personified the shrines; they face us as people do («[...] so stehen sie uns gegenüber»). Even more remarkably, he placed these newly personified objects in an extreme existential situation; they have only themselves. As a result, «Our distance from them seems enormous. A visitor to the exhibition, surrounded by so many unreliable things, may be shocked to again encounter something reliable. [...] Perhaps he will, for the first time in years, again feel what it means to be secure.»¹³

Schnitzler turned the shrines into people and then contrasted these reliable personified objects with the «unreliable things» that normally surrounded the visitors to *RK*. Schnitzler's phrase is a euphemism, however; these «unreliable things» were mainly *people*: Schnitzler's fellow citizens. In a letter from August of 1946, a year after the war had ended and a year before *RK* opened, Schnitzler told his American friend Henry Regnery that the horror of the war years was not past and that despair in Germany was in fact increasing. This was not because of the destruction of all the things Germans had loved, but stemmed instead from the «total isolation» in which they had lived under the Nazis and still must live. This isolation was caused not by material need, but by existential crisis. Schnitzler wrote that Regnery could not imagine what it was like to live «in a society where no one trusts anyone else or can be trusted, a society where mistrust is elevated to the basic societal principle».¹⁴ Schnitzler's analysis of the psychological and social effects of Nazism is familiar; it overlaps with the one made a few years later by Hannah Arendt in *The Origins of*

Totalitarianism. But it must surprise that the way out of the German dilemma is to be found in Romanesque reliquary shrines, which for Schnitzler possess human characteristics that in 1947 a resident of Cologne could not find in his neighbors.

Surprising and puzzling is Schnitzler's choice of *Dasein* to describe what these shrines want to demonstrate. The word has strong Heideggerian resonances, but Martin Heidegger's *Dasein* is explicitly and crucially a human attribute, precisely that which separates human existence from all other forms of being. Schnitzler's use of *Dasein* may be a logical consequence of his personification of the shrines, but it may also derive from a different but related source: Rainer Maria Rilke. The poet was much on Schnitzler's mind in just this period; Schnitzler cited Rilke in his contribution to the public debate on what was to be done with Cologne's Romanesque churches held in the winter of 1946–1947.¹⁵ An exceptionally relevant intertext is Rilke's *Der Reliquienschrein*, which contrasts the *Dinge* normally made by a smith with the shrine of the poem's title, which forces the smith to his knees and makes him question his *Dasein*. But Rilke's *Dasein*, like Heidegger's, is a human attribute, not something that we would expect from a centuries-old piece of metalwork.¹⁶

Whatever its source, Schnitzler's use of *Dasein* in reference to Romanesque art indicates that he ascribed remarkable qualities to that art; with this came remarkable power. Schnitzler wrote that the works on display in *RK* may «shock» German viewers because they «have nothing of necessity, patchwork, or the makeshift about them; they are calm and balanced and fill even the bare gallery in which we placed them with their dignity.»¹⁷ There are echoes here of a nostalgia for the Middle Ages as an era of universally-held certainties and Schnitzler sometimes followed a familiar line of thought that held that the power of medieval art derived from its Christian function.¹⁸ But this was not his main intellectual path. It is not the Christianity of the objects on display, but their very existence that is the source of their immense power. Their survival, which must have seemed close to miraculous in the context of the destruction that marked Cologne in 1947, was the proof of that power.

It is noteworthy that Schnitzler explicitly rejected the redemptive view of the Middle Ages as the foundation of a Christian *Abendland* that was being revived in West Germany.¹⁹ Such a view became common in the late 1940s, but for Schnitzler the objects in *RK* could not be the forerunners for modern Germans because their audience was incapable of grasping their power and strength:

They are not yet passé. They remain contemporary. It is we who have forgotten how to interact with them. We are frightened by their grandeur. That is why this exhibition was necessary. They are meant to help us understand what remains ours. We stand before the first things that were made on the Rhine. They will be the last, if we do not grasp them now.²⁰

Schnitzler's mixture of hope about the power of medieval art with an almost paralyzing doubt about the ability of his fellow Germans (or fellow humans?) to perceive that power stands in telling contrast to the thought of Adolf Rieth who, a year earlier, had organized a show of medieval art in Tübingen. *Meisterwerke aus den Kölner Museen und der Württembergischen Staatsgalerie Stuttgart* bears the closest comparison to *RK* because it included many of the same objects. Rieth hoped that his exhibition would show «other countries that we are of a mind to clean up not only the rubble around us, but the rubble in us, and that we will oppose the nihilism that threatens to seize our hearts with the joyful affirmation of the immortality of German culture.»²¹ Rieth's optimism stands in marked contrast to

Schnitzler's worries. This may be because Tübingen had suffered much less damage than Cologne and so the viewers of Rieth's exhibition were literally dealing with less (external) rubble. Chronology may also have played a role; Rieth's earlier exhibition was separated from *RK* by the devastating *Hungerwinter* of 1946-1947.²² In any event, a review of *RK* from a Cologne newspaper indicates that the city's mood was much closer to Schnitzler's than to Rieth's: «There is much that one would like to say. But what good are words, when it is eyes and souls that need to be opened?»²³ Faced with the existential challenge of the reliable things on view in *RK*, this reviewer answered his own question; the rest of the review is simply a list of the works on display. Words turned out not to be enough for the desperate situation.²⁴ This inability to grasp the objects in *RK* manifested precisely the gap between the Middle Ages and modern Cologne that so worried Schnitzler, a gap that was widened because the works on display had so recently passed through the *narrows of transmission* that still blocked the path for many of their viewers.

Another member of the working committee that organized *RK* was able to bridge those narrows, but it required a radically different understanding of the objects in the exhibition. For the priest Joseph Hoster, religious values were (un-surprisingly) sufficient to solve Schnitzler's existential crisis: «In the final analysis, it is our Christian thoughts, still alive today, that take form in these works»; they are «more than works of art, they are holy objects».²⁵ Hoster's self-assured position would come to dominate in subsequent confrontations with medieval art in postwar Cologne (notably the cathedral jubilee of 1948), just as the redemptive *Abendland-Ideologie* came to dominate more widely in West Germany, culminating in the 1956 exhibition *Werdendes Abendland an Rhein und Ruhr* in Essen's Villa Hügel. In light of those developments, Schnitzler's doubts in 1947, doubts that led him desperately to embrace Romanesque art (of all things!), stand as a remarkable chapter in the history of the reception of the Middle Ages in modern Germany and as an interesting example of the power that survivals of art can take on in the wake of destruction.

Anmerkungen

- 1 «Wir stehen vor den ersten Dingen, die am Rhein geschaffen wurden. Es werden die letzten sein, wenn wir sie jetzt nicht ergreifen.» [Hermann Schnitzler], *Romanische Kunst*, Cologne 1947, p. 6.
- 2 «Vielleicht spürt er zum erstenmal nach Jahren wieder, was es heißt: geborgen sein.» Ibid.
- 3 Dr. Br. [Wolfgang Braunfels], *Romanische Kunst*, in: *Kölnische Rundschau*, 12 September 1947, p. 2.
- 4 «[...] eine begrüßenswerte Notlösung [...]. Dr. [Rudolf?] Jardon, *Romanische Kunst*, in: *Rheinische Zeitung*, 10 September 1947, p. 2; see also Braunfels 1947. The *Rheinische Zeitung* review is likely by Rudolf Jardon, a left-leaning cultural critic of the Weimar era. On him, see Debbie Lewer, «Eine Epoche ähnlich jener des zu Ende gehenden Mittelalters». Die kulturkritische Auseinandersetzung mit dem Mittelalter in der Weimarer Republik, in: *Mittelalterbilder im Nationalsozialismus*, ed. by Maike Steinkamp and Bruno Reudenbach, Berlin, 2013, p. 49–62, here p. 53.
- 5 There is no full biography of Schnitzler, but see Peter Bloch, Hermann Schnitzler, in: *Kunstchronik* 1977, Vol. 30, p. 220–223; Gedächtnisfeier des Pro Arte Medii Aevi Freunde des Schnütgen-Museums e. V. zu Ehren von Hermann Schnitzler 15.12.1976, in: *Wallraf-Richartz Jahrbuch* 1978, Vol. 40, p. 7–12; and Rainer Kahsnitz, Schnitzler, Hermann, in: *Neue Deutsche Biographie* 2007, Vol. 23, p. 337–338. For the period covered in this essay, an important source is a memoir by Schnitzler's son which contains substantial excerpts from his father's letters; Heinrich Schnitzler, *Mosaiksteine*, Trier 2000. I am grateful to Hiltrud Westermann-Angerhausen for alerting me to the existence of this hard-to-find book and to Manuela Beer and Adam Stead for providing me access to it.
- 6 In August of 1946, Schnitzler wrote to his American friend Henry Regnery that he was out of work because of his Nazi Party membership; Schnitzler 2000, p. 9. Peter Bloch, however, assessed Schnitzler as deeply unpolitical (Bloch 1977, p. 221), while Daniela Wilmes emphasized that the Donnerstag-Gesellschaft, in which Schnitzler played a leading role, considered themselves an elite uncorrupted by the Nazi experience; *Wettbewerb um die Moderne*, Berlin 2012, p. 149–158.
- 7 For a thorough treatment of Schnitzler's lecture, see Wilmes 2012, p. 149–158. Schnitzler recommended Picard's book to Regnery in a letter of 1 January 1947; Schnitzler 2000, p. 121.
- 8 *Führer durch die Jahrtausend-Ausstellung der Rheinlande in Köln* 1925, ed. by Wilhelm Ewald and Bruno Kuske, Cologne, n. d. [1925]; *Jahrtausendfeiern und Befreiungsfeiern im Rheinland*, ed. by Gertrude Cepel-Kaufmann, Essen 2009.
- 9 «Selbst auf ein fester umrissenes Programm haben wir verzichtet.» Schnitzler 1947, p. 5.
- 10 «Nicht die materielle Not allein hat uns zu ihm geführt. Wir haben ihn bewußt geübt. Das einzelne Kunstwerk sollte von allen äußereren Bindungen befreit erscheinen, in die es sonst wohl eingebunden ist.» Ibid.
- 11 On *Deutsche Größe*, and especially its display of medieval art, see (with full bibliography) William J. Diebold, Die Ausstellungspräsentation des Magdeburger Reiters im modernen Deutschland, in: *Der Magdeburger Reiter*, ed. by Gabriele Köster, Regensburg 2017, p. 339–353 and The High Middle Ages on Display in the Exhibition *Deutsche Größe* (1940–1942), in: Stein-kamp/Reudenbach 2013, p. 103–117.
- 12 «Damals sollte ein geschichtliches Faktum, die tausendjährige Zugehörigkeit der Rheinlande zum Reich, feierlich bezeugt werden. Heute wollen diese Werke nichts bezeugen als ihr Dasein. Sie stehen da als reine Gegenstände. Nur auf sich selbst gestellt, so stehen sie uns heute gegenüber.» Schnitzler 1947, p. 5.
- 13 «Ungeheuer scheint unser Abstand zu ihnen. Vielleicht wird mancher Besucher der Ausstellung erschrecken, wenn er nach so vielen unverlässlichen Dingen, die ihn sonst umgeben, erneut vor etwas hintritt, das verlässlich ist. [...] Vielleicht spürt er zum erstenmal nach Jahren wieder, was es heißt: geborgen sein.» Ibid., p. 6.
- 14 «[...] völlige Vereinsamung [...] in einer Gemeinschaft [...] wo keiner dem anderen vertraut und vertrauen darf, wo das Misstrauen sozusagen zum System des Zusammenlebens erhoben ist.» Schnitzler 2000, p. 7.
- 15 *Kirchen in Trümmern*, ed. by Gesellschaft für christliche Kultur, Cologne 1948, p. 58. Cf. Toni Feldkirchen's recollection that in the previous winter he and Schnitzler intensively read Rilke's *Duino Elegies*; Gedächtnisfeier 1978, p. 7.
- 16 For a thorough recent discussion of the relationship of Rilke's *Dasein* to Heidegger's, see Thomas Pfau, «Superabundant Being»: Disambiguating Rilke and Heidegger, in: *Modern Theology* 2019, Vol. 35, pp. 23–42.
- 17 «Wenn er vor Dinge tritt, die nichts von Not und Flickwerk und Vergehen an sich haben; die ausgeruht und ausgeglichen sind; die selbst den kahlen Raum, in den wir sie gebracht, mit ihrer Würde füllen.» Schnitzler 1947, p. 6.
- 18 For example, he wrote of the objects in RK: «Noch leuchtet Gottes Licht aus ihnen auf unsere dunkle Erde.» Ibid.
- 19 See, with additional bibliography, Vanessa Conze, Facing the Future Backwards. «Abendland» as an Anti-liberal Idea of Europe in Germany between the First World War and the 1960s, in: *Anti-Liberal Europe*, ed. Dieter Gose-

winkel, New York 2015, p. 72–89 and Georg Mölich, Christliches Abendland am Rhein – ein politisches Denkmodell der frühen Bonner Republik, in: *Die Bonner Republik 1945–1963 – Die Gründerphase und die Adenauer-Ära*, eds. Gertrude Cepi-Kaufmann, Jasmin Grande, Ulrich Rosar, and Jürgen Wiener, Bielefeld 2018, p. 85–94. For a view of RK through the lens of the ancient and Christian *Abendland*, see Hans-Rudolf Peters, Antike und Mittelalter. Ein Rückblick auf drei rheinische Kunstaustellungen 1947, in: *Aussaat 1947–1948*, Vol. 2, p. 231–235.

20 «Sie sind noch nicht vergangen. Sie bleiben gegenwärtig. Nur haben wir verlernt, mit ihnen umzugehen. Wir fürchten uns vor ihrer Größe. Darum war diese Ausstellung notwendig. Sie soll uns helfen zu ergreifen, was unser Eigentum geblieben ist. Wir stehen vor den ersten Dingen, die am Rhein geschaffen wurden. Es werden die letzten sein, wenn wir sie jetzt nicht ergreifen.» Schnitzler 1947, p. 6.

21 «Darüber hinaus möge auch die Ausstellung dem Ausland beweisen, daß wir gesonnen sind, nicht nur mit den Trümmern um uns, sondern auch in uns aufzuräumen und daß wir

dem Nihilismus, der unsere Herzen zu ergreifen droht, das freudige Bekenntnis zur Unsterblichkeit deutscher Kultur entgegensetzen wollen.» *Meisterwerke aus den Kölner Museen und der Württembergischen Staatsgalerie Stuttgart*, ed. by Herbert Hoffmann, Tübingen 1946, p. 6.

22 Schnitzler wrote to Regnery on New Year's Day in 1947 that the level of hope in Germany was much lower than it had been a year earlier. Schnitzler 2000, p. 121.

23 «Vieles möchte man aufzählen; doch was wollen Worte, wo Augen und Seele geöffnet sein müssen.» Jardon 1947.

24 For the same author's more articulate review of an earlier Cologne exhibition of medieval art, see Dr. [Rudolf?] Jardon, Wiedersehen mit Meisterwerken, in: *Rheinische Zeitung*, 23 March 1946, p. 3.

25 «Im letzten sind es unsere christlichen Gedanken die, heute noch lebendig, in diesen Werken Gestalt wurden [...] mehr als Kunstwerke, es sind Heiligtümer». Cologne, Historisches Archiv des Erzbistums Köln, Nachlass Hoster, Vorsignatur 323 and Verein für christliche Kunst, Folder 24.