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The River Flows Into Itself

Julius Schlosser

**The Literature of Art: A Manual for Source Work in
the History of Early Modern European Art Theory.**

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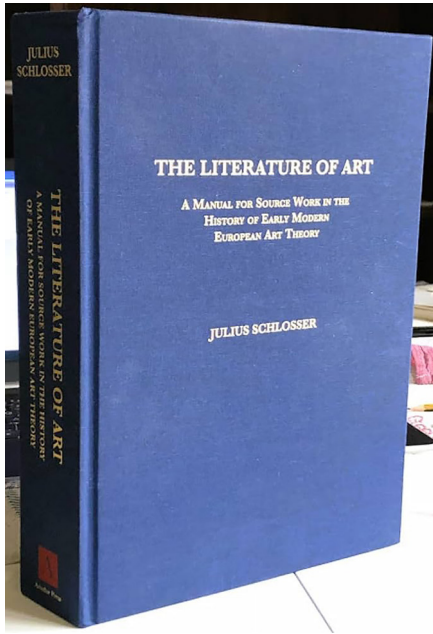
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In a short autobiographical reminiscence about his student days in Vienna, Ernst Gombrich once described his teacher Julius von Schlosser as a memorable yet hugely idiosyncratic figure. Tall and physically imposing, the “almighty ‘Hofrat Schlosser’” remained unfailingly committed to the values and manners of the old k.u.k. monarchy, and “could only be approached with all signs of respect”. His lectures and seminars appeared at times deliberately esoteric and self-indulgent, delivered in a hushed voice with countless obscure references that were unintelligible to all but the most widely-read of his pupils. In his lecture notes, Gombrich once scribbled the remark “the river flows into itself”, thus highlighting the solipsistic and self-absorbed nature of his teacher (Some reminiscences of Julius von Schlosser as a teacher, in: *Journal for Art Historiography* 23, Dec. 2020 ↗). Gombrich’s reminiscences were first published in German in a 1988 special issue of the

journal *kritische berichte*, devoted entirely to Julius von Schlosser (Einige Erinnerungen an Julius von Schlosser als Lehrer, in: *kritische berichte* 1988/4, 5–9). This publication marked, in many respects, the beginning of an impressive rediscovery of the œuvre of the Viennese art historian. Since then, interest in Schlosser has continued unabatedly, and over the years many historiographic analyses of his life and work, but also numerous translations and re-editions of his writings, have appeared. Schlosser was a productive scholar, but the bulk of historiographic attention is usually focused on a number of short monographs and extended essays, devoted to topics that had long remained on the margins of art historical research interests. In particular, historiography has focused on the 1908 publication on *Die Kunst- und Wunderkammern der Spätrenaissance* and the 1910 essay *Geschichte der Porträtbildnerei in Wachs*, as well as the 1935 methodological intervention *Stil- oder Sprachgeschichte der Kunst*. All three themes show an elective affinity to current priorities of the field since the 1980s, such as the inclusion of non-art images and an interest in the superstitious ‘power of images’. Scholarship has repeatedly and justly highlighted the affinities of Schlosser’s to the thoughts of Aby Warburg (Georges Didi-Huberman, *Viscosities and Survival*, in: Roberta Panzanelli (ed.), *Ephemeral Bodies*, Los Angeles 2008, 154–169; Michael Thimann, Julius von Schlosser, in: Ulrich Pfisterer (Hg.), *Klassiker der Kunstgeschichte*. Vol. 2 *Von Winckelmann bis Warburg*, Munich 2007, 194–213).

Less attention has been paid to what was arguably Schlosser’s *magnum opus*: the 1924 *Die Kunstliteratur: ein Handbuch zur Quellenkunde der neueren Kunstgeschichte*. With this publication, Schlosser had provided a magisterial survey of European art writing from the Middle Ages to the 18th century, and a comprehensive bibliography of research in this area. There is no doubt that this project was an important

mine for many researchers in the field. It also was the model for successor projects, such as Johannes Dobai's monumental *Kunstliteratur des Klassizismus und der Romantik in England* (4 vols, Bern, 1974–77). Schlosser's canonical text also forms the intellectual foundation for recent attempts to structurally rethink the boundaries of what counts as 'art literature' – Michael Thimann's work on early modern *Bilddiskurse* is particularly noteworthy in this context (*Bilddiskurse von Dürer bis Winckelmann: eine Revision anlässlich der Edition von Harsdörffers "Kunstverständigem Discurs von der edlen Mahlerey"*, in: Michael Thimann und Claus Zittel (Hg.), *Georg Philipp Harsdörffers "Kunstverständige Discurse"*, Heidelberg 2010, 11–38).

It is indeed striking that Schlosser's work on art writing was similarly expansive as his interest in visual culture – he included for example discussions of texts theorising the study of medals, thus aiming to bring art history in dialogue with adjacent subjects such as numismatics. It is nevertheless fair to say that Schlosser's book was more used than read (Raphael Rosenberg, *Delineating the history of art literature by genre: Julius von Schlosser revisited*, in: *Journal of Art Historiography* 24, June 2021[↗]) – which is of course rooted in the very nature of the book: it is more akin to a commented bibliography than an academic monograph. Consequently, the book was regarded not so much as a monument of scholarship, but as a living organism: the editors of the Italian (transl. Filippo Rossi, 1935) and French (transl. Jacques Chavy, 1984) translation for example both updated Schlosser's bibliographic sections extensively, thus trying to keep it relevant as research progressed.

Schlosser among the Anglophones

100 years after its first publication, Schlosser's *Kunstliteratur* has now been translated, for the first time, into English. This was a monumental endeavour, resulting in an impressive volume of over 700 pages in A4 format, many of them filled by densely printed bibliographic information in two columns. The translator and editor, Karl Johns, is ideally qualified to tackle this daunting task. Johns has long been a *habitué* of

the *Journal of Art Historiography* (edited, for fourteen years, by the late Richard Woodfield) where he has published many articles on the Vienna School of Art History, as well as translations of key texts from the period (including Gombrich's autobiographical reminiscences, quoted in the beginning).

Johns' translation is driven by the desire to help Schlosser's work to more prominence in anglophone scholarly discourse. In some respects, it might come as a surprise that the *Kunstliteratur* is not better known in this part of the world, considering that one of Schlosser's star pupils, Ernst Gombrich, spent most of his career in Britain. But it appears as if Gombrich had little interest in promoting his teacher's work to colleagues in his adopted homeland. In 1952, he penned an erudite essay on the *Kunstliteratur* – but published it exclusively in German (E. H. Gombrich, *Kunstliteratur*, in: *Atlantisbuch der Kunst: eine Enzyklopädie der bildenden Künste*, Zürich 1952, 665–679). This text was translated into English only in the 1990s, when the history of art history became slowly but surely an established subfield of the discipline.

It is entirely possible that this was a calculated stance. Within Britain, Gombrich and the Warburg Institute very much considered themselves as an elitist enclave, set apart from the connoisseurial tradition of art history cultivated at the Courtauld Institute – but also from the older antiquarian tradition of art writing that still blossomed in post-war Britain (Hans C. Hönes, *The Rise and Fall of the "Clerks": British Art History 1950–1970*, in: *British Art Studies* 24, 2023[↗]). For Gombrich, embracing the *Kunstliteratur* (effectively a feat of compilation and list-making) too admiringly and publicly might have created unwelcome association to those who regarded scholarship primarily as a positivist endeavour, and the amassing of data as an important goal.

The muted reception of the *Kunstliteratur* in Britain is, however, not only indicative of a certain distance between Gombrich and his British colleagues – but suggests also a difference in scholarly ethos that separated him from his teacher. Schlosser was evidently keen on perceiving himself as the head of an

academic 'school'. The *Kunstliteratur* is, in many respects, the outcome of this approach: it appears that Schlosser regularly farmed out topics to his students, who then wrote seminar papers or doctoral dissertations on selected questions of artistic theory – and whose insights fed into their master's magisterial survey. Gombrich appears to have had no interest in such a way of conducting research. He appears much more of a lone wolf, whose doctoral students often pursued topics that were less closely connected to Gombrich's own research. The difference in academic ethos might be one of the reasons why he did not give his teacher more overt and public reverence. This is of course not to say that Gombrich – and many other scholars working in Britain – did not use the *Kunstliteratur* extensively, and absorbed its information.

Schlosser's Relevance

As a result of all this, the book had – in the British context at least – no reception to speak of. Even authors such as Anthony Blunt, who wrote his primer *Artistic Theory in Italy* (1940) while employed at the Warburg Institute, does not discuss the book in any meaningful way. This is of course the fate of all reference works: though magnificently learned, Schlosser was forced to be concise, and to introduce each text only so briefly that it hardly warrants a quotation. Lastly, the *Kunstliteratur* also built no bridges to the Anglosphere. Schlosser had little interest in British art writing, and key authors of the English and Scottish tradition of art historiography (such as Hilliard or Turnbull) are not discussed in any meaningful way, if they are mentioned at all. However, when art history finally – and belatedly – managed to establish itself as an academic discipline in Britain, it initially prioritised research and teaching in the national artistic tradition (Hans C. Hönes, British art history and the History of British art, in: *Kunstchronik* 75/7, 2022, 343–348 [↗](#)). For this new generation of British art historians, Schlosser's book was of limited relevance.

In the eyes of the editor, the justification for tackling the mammoth project of translating the *Kunstliteratur* into English, lies exclusively in the continued relevance

and usability of Schlosser's *magnum opus*. Consequently, Johns has not burdened the edition with additional essays providing historiographic contextualisation or such like: the introduction spans a mere five pages (and one footnote) and gives only the barest possible summary of Schlosser's life and his intellectual milieu. This appears somewhat of a missed opportunity. There is no doubt that Schlosser's book is of historiographic interest, and a more in-depth contextualisation of his project would have provided added value for the anglophone reader who is likely not able to draw on the ever-growing Germanic body of scholarship on Schlosser.

The translation itself is excellent and demonstrates an intimate knowledge of German art writing of the time, its nuances and terminological quirks. Johns has taken the bold step of translating the book more or less verbatim – to stay as true to the master's voice as possible. It is debatable whether this decision will help the publication's overarching aim, namely to find new readers for Schlosser's work. Johns' assessment is lucid: Schlosser's "peripatetic sentences with redundancies surviving from the academic lecture mode, are characteristically long, elliptic, nested and difficult" (xxxii). In translation, this problem is only amplified: at times the book feels as if written in the mock-accented German that were given to German characters in English comedies of the post-war period (think of Fawlty Towers' famous "Don't mention the war" episode). Without the comic timing of John Cleese, however, this is not very entertaining, although there are some involuntarily funny moments: Schlosser once described his favourite (and earliest, most longstanding) students as "Urschüler", which is translated as "primal pupils" – a distinctly odd phrase, more suited for evoking the mental image of some feral kids sneakily smoking a fag before class, than the venerable kind of loyal intellectual discipleship that Schlosser had in mind. Given these linguistic idiosyncrasies, the book is certainly a difficult read.

More important than such linguistic quibbles is, however, the key question of whether Schlosser's book is "still worth reading", as Johns claims. Authors such as Raphael Rosenberg have doubted this and concluded

that, “[i]n the age of the internet, along with all other printed encyclopaedias, *Die Kunstliteratur* lost much of its value as a reference work”. Rosenberg has a point, but one could go even further: it is probably fair to say that bibliographies have long lost the significance they once held. The Bibliography of the History of Art (BHA) was discontinued in 2007 – a full 18 years ago. If bibliographies have a future, they are unlikely to take the shape of an authoritatively written, printed book, as is the case with Schlosser’s. Projects such as *Oxford Bibliographies Online* have emphasised this shift: the bibliography is seen less as a definitive and comprehensive survey of the state of research, but an expertly curated introduction to a topic.

Publishers normally require prospective authors to pen a book proposal, detailing the intended audiences for their project. *The Literature of Art* is published by Ariadne Press, a publisher specialising in the “small niche market” of English translations of works by Austrian authors. Given that the Press is run by Johns and his mother, there was probably no need to jump through the usual hoops. This is just as well, as I will confess that I am rather at a loss to imagine a potential reader for this tome. One has to assume that this book is intended to appeal to readers who are neither in a position to read the German original, nor the French or Italian translations of the *Kunstliteratur*. This poses significant challenges when dealing with a book that is, essentially, a commented bibliography whose references are predominantly in languages other than English. How many readers, with no knowledge of German, French or Italian, will pore, awestruck by the Viennese master’s multilingual erudition, over scores of pages listing distant yet alluring titles such as (to pick a random example) von Pastor’s *Geschichte der Päpste seit dem Ausgang des Mittelalters* (1886–), Venturi’s *La lettera di Raffaello a Leone X* (1918), or (published “most recently”) Julius Vogel’s *Bramante und Raffael* (1910). I am tempted to say “not many”, but this would probably be overly optimistic.

There is good reason to suspect that the editor is fully aware of this. As a bibliography, Schlosser’s book is

of course outdated, presenting the editor with a double bind. Johns decided to address this by carefully updating the bibliographic apparatus of the book. The present volume does not just include Schlosser’s original text of 1924, but enriches it with later addenda that were first published in the Italian and French translations of the book, compiled in the second edition by Otto Kurz in 1956 and André Chastel in 1984. While the “Germanizing” of the English implies an almost hagiographic reverence to Schlosser’s original, the editor clearly felt unable to maintain the same attitude when it came to the bibliographic sections of the book.

Updating the bibliographic references is, in any case, love’s labour’s lost. Johns cannot match Schlosser’s erudition, and this is not meant as a criticism. Research on art theory has simply expanded significantly over the last hundred years – making it impossible for any one individual to master the whole field. It is telling, for example, that Johannes Dobai’s treatment of the British *Kunstliteratur* between 1700 and 1840 (a much narrower scope than Schlosser’s survey of roughly 800 years of European art writing) has filled four fat volumes, compared to Schlosser’s single tome. It almost goes without saying that Johns’ additions necessarily appear somewhat incidental and far from complete – and thus of little value to specialists. Students, however, will certainly not consult this weighty tome, written in a crudely anglicised language, to find an introductory discussion (and bibliography) on Alberti or Raphael. For this purpose, better and more up-to-date alternatives exist.

Aby Warburg once described Julius von Schlosser as a man “of the eighteenth century. Type of the witty Abbé”. While perhaps not entirely just, Warburg’s assessment does indeed point out the strong antiquarian streak in Schlosser’s work. Johns’ edition is heir to exactly this spirit; overall, the book appears a labour of love, produced with impressive care and touching devotion to its subject. With regard to its impact on future scholarship, however, one must fear that the *Literature of Art* is – to quote Gombrich’s assessment of his teacher – yet another “river that flows into itself”.